

Keeping A Distance: Social Identity, Workplace Bullying, and Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

Workplace bullying has been widely researched due to the negative effects it has on employees' psychological well-being and job satisfaction (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). At the same time, social identity theory has been applied to the study of work place bullying as a potential means to understand and reduce the experience of it. In this study, participants ($N = 65$) took part in an online questionnaire where experiences of bullying, social identity, and job satisfaction were measured. Analyses indicated that social identity fully mediates the association between bullying and job satisfaction, such that experience of workplace bullying leads to a reduction in social identification, and a resultant increase in job satisfaction. The implications of these findings for a social identity account of workplace bullying, and the ways in which these findings might inform workplace anti-bullying interventions are discussed.

Keeping the Distance: Social Identity, Workplace Bullying, and Job Satisfaction

Workplace bullying has become a widely researched area due to the publicity it has received through media exposure of single and multiple cases from employees who have been mistreated in their organisation (e.g., Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). The phenomenon was originally coined by Leymann (1990), who found that bullying in the workplace was similar to bullying behaviours among children in the playground. This led to increased research on the prevalence rates of bullying in organisations. It is considered an extreme stressor at work (Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996) which costs companies millions of pounds a year as a result of low productivity, high turnover, absences and sickness (Samnani & Singh, 2012). Further, a meta-analysis by Bowling & Beehr (2006) found that there was a negative association between experiencing bullying at work and job satisfaction. It is now clear that reduction of bullying at work would be beneficial to employees and to organizations. Another vein of research in a social identity framework has shown that increased social identification with a workplace leads to increased well-being (Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, Haslam, & Jetten, 2014). Accordingly, this paper will explore the role of social identification with colleagues as a mediator of the relationship between workplace bullying and job satisfaction.

Workplace bullying

Workplace bullying is defined as a range of *repeated* (at least once a week) negative acts that are directed at one or more individuals over time (minimum of six months), who typically cannot defend themselves (Rodriguez-Munoz et al., 2009; Einarsen, et al., 2003). These acts are often unwanted by the target, and may be carried out either consciously or unconsciously, which can lead to disruption of job performance, distress, humiliation and an unpleasant working environment (Einarsen

& Raknes, 1997). According to Einarsen and colleagues (2003), power imbalance plays a central feature in workplace bullying as it can appear between people in different positions namely; between individuals, between managers and subordinates, and between groups and an individual. Therefore, it can be regarded as distinct from one-time acts of aggression and conflicts as behaviours are persistent throughout a longer period of time (Tepper & Henle, 2011). Bullying has previously been measured using the Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) which includes measurement of excessive monitoring of workload, and undermining and humiliation, without explicitly labelling the behaviours as “bullying” *per se* (Einarsen, Raknes & Matthiesen, 1994). The current study will be using a revised version of the NAQ (NAQ-R) from Einarsen, Hoel & Notelaers’s (2009) study to measure workplace bullying as the items specifically measure workplace bullying from a factor analysis that was conducted in their study.

Workplace bullying and Well-being

Workplace bullying has been found to have detrimental effects on well-being such as mental and physical health (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012), emotional exhaustion (Tuckey & Neall, 2014), and job satisfaction (Carroll & Lauzier, 2014). In line with previous research, it is predicted here that individuals who experience bullying will show less job satisfaction compared to individuals who have not experienced workplace bullying (Einarsen, Matthiesen & Skogstad, 1998). Carroll & Lauzier (2014) carried out a questionnaire study on 249 Canadian workers and found that workplace bullying negatively affected job satisfaction. It would suggest that workplace bullying can be regarded as one of the main stressors in the work environment as it has been found to have detrimental effects on satisfaction at work

and, increased employee intention to leave resulting in higher turnover within organisations (Glambek, Matthiesen, Hetland & Einarsen, 2014). Here we will measure job satisfaction as an important indicator of well-being, using.....

The Role of Social Identification

The central element to the current study is that the link between bullying and job satisfaction may be affected by social identification. According to Social Identity Theory, (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) people acquire a significant part of their self-esteem not only based on their individual characteristics, but also, as members of different social groups. People are motivated to establish and maintain a positive social identity through comparing similarities and differences with out-groups to which they do not belong. Tajfel & Turner (1979) further suggested that the more individuals identify with the group identity the more motivated they become to behave in a way that represents their group identity. It is further suggested that organisations create and maintain formal groups that are given goals, tasks, and responsibilities which represent salience for people within groups based on similarities and social needs (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Haslam, Jetten & Waghorn (2009) asked 30 participants from two production teams in a theatre company to participate in a longitudinal questionnaire study on five different occasions from the audition stage to post performances. They found that high identification with the workgroup predicted lower levels of burnout during times of stress. This suggests that support from work colleagues and increased self-esteem from being part of a group may help to reduce some of the symptoms felt from work related stress, such as bullying. On the other hand, decreased identification with the workgroup and organisation can result in higher intention to leave the organisation (Glambek et al. 2014).

Further evidence for the positive impact of social identification at work comes from McNeill, Kerr & Mavor (2014), who found that there is a strong association between group membership and well-being whilst studying the perceived group norms of medical students. They found that there was a positive correlation between identification and xxxxxx. However, they found that medical students were reluctant to seek help if they were experiencing stress and mental health problems as this was perceived as a weakness because medical students perceive high resilience to be a normative trait of a medical student (Chew-Graham, Rogers & Yassin, 2003). This suggests that high identification with a group can result in reduced well-being due to unhealthy choices made in order to be consistent with group norms.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) has already been used as an antecedent of experiencing bullying to explain *when* individuals may be targets of bullying behaviours. One suggestion is that how much one identifies with a group can predict being a target of bullying, as individuals who are viewed as being distinct from their group members can be perceived as a member of the out-group rather than the in-group (Alexander, MacLaren, O’Gorman & Taheri, 2012). In support of this, Escartin et al. (2012) found in their questionnaire study that individuals who identified strongly with their group were less likely to be targets of bullying within their own group and also other groups.

However, an alternative hypothesis to the one given above is that experience of bullying has an effect on social identification. In other words, bullying is predictive of changes in one's social identification. This hypothesis is in line with research showing that group identification can be an important *outcome* of intergroup processes, and reflects (among other things) how committed individuals are to the group (e.g., Doosje, Spears, &

Ellemers, 2002). An event that has positive implications for group identity (e.g., when the ingroup or an ingroup member acts in a norm-consistent manner) may lead ingroup members to report higher levels of identification (e.g., Kessler & Hollbach, 2005; cf. ‘basking in reflected glory’, Cialdini et al., 1976). Conversely, an event that has negative implications for group identity (e.g., when an ingroup or ingroup member acts in a counter-normative manner, or when an ingroup compares unfavourably to an outgroup) can result in less strong identification with the ingroup (Ellemers, 1993; Kessler & Hollbach, 2005; cf. ‘cutting off reflected failure’, Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). Similarly, Matschke and Sassenberg (2010) showed that in the face of negative group-relevant events group members use individual strategies of exit from or integration with the group, depending on their internal motivation to belong to the group. In this respect, experience of bullying might lead to a decrease in social identification with the work group (Glambek et al., 2014). Glambek et al. (2014) conducted a longitudinal questionnaire study on Norwegian offshore workers and found that workplace bullying significantly predicted job insecurity and the intention to leave the organisation six months later. They proposed that intention to leave can point to decreased identification with their colleagues and organisation as the presence of workplace bullying may not be in line with targets’ views of their workgroup identity. Therefore, targets feel the need to leave the organisation as they cannot endure the emotional strain of experiencing bullying.

However, these researchers did not measure social identification with the workplace. The current study will measure identification with the work group using items from xxxxxx’s scale on identification with group membership which measures social identification on a multidimensional level including self-categorisation; emotional evaluation of group membership; and evaluation of ties and differences between other groups. This measure is used to test whether experiencing bullying at work has a positive or negative impact on social

identification, and in turn, whether this drives the impact that bullying has on job satisfaction.

Current Study

Drawing together the research outlined above, the study reported in this paper looks at the relation between bullying in the work place, job satisfaction, and social identification. We propose that, as previously found, there will be a negative association between being the target of bullying, and job satisfaction. We further hypothesize that social identity will mediate the link between being a target of bullying and job satisfaction, explaining why being a target of bullying leads to decreased job satisfaction . Since past research is not clear as to how social identification will be affected by experience of bullying, we aim here to explore the nature of the mediation.

Method

Participants

The study was approved by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee at Oxford Brookes University and participants in current employment as employees were recruited through social media websites which included Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter as well as posters around Oxford Brookes University Campus and local businesses in Oxford.

One hundred and fifty-four participants took part in the study; however, a missing values analysis was conducted and participants who had more than 30% missing data were excluded. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 65 employee; 25 males and 40 females. The sample mostly consisted of participants between 18 and 25

years old and more than half of participants have been working in their organisation for 0 – 2 years. The majority of participants worked in medium sized groups of 10 – 50.

Design

The study had a correlational design that contained items measuring experiences of bullying, level of identification with colleagues. The outcome measure was job satisfaction.

Measures and Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in an online questionnaire on job satisfaction. Participants were asked to answer all questions in the questionnaire however; they were given the choice to skip questions if they deemed them too sensitive.

Social Identification with the workgroup was measured using five items previously used in Obst & White's (2005) study on identification with group membership. Statements measured how much participants identified with people in their workgroup i.e. *"At work I generally feel strong ties towards other members of my team"*. Responses to these statements were based on a 7- point Likert-type scale of 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). One item was reverse scored and found a good reliability with Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$.

Workplace bullying was measured using eleven items from a factor analysis of the NAQ-R of work-related bullying (Einarsen, Hoel & Notelaers, 2009). Participants were asked to indicate how frequently they experienced the eleven items on a 5-point Likert-type scale of 1 (never) and 5 (daily). Items from the NAQ-R were used as

bullying was not explicitly labelled, for example; *"My opinions are ignored at work"* and *"I am aware of repeated reminders of my job errors and mistakes in certain situations and tasks"*. This measure was highly reliable with a Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$.

Job satisfaction was measured using six items also from Falchi et al.'s (2009) study. The wording of the original scale was modified in the responses to fit in better with the current study; however the original 7-point Likert-type scale remained the same. Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed with the statements from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to statements such as *"Generally I feel satisfied with my job"*. This measure was highly reliable with a Cronbach's $\alpha = .86$.

Demographic questions included: gender (*Male, female or I do not wish to disclose*); age range; how many people participants work with; length of employment with current organisation; and job sector were taken from the Prospects website (prospects.ac.uk). Participants were also given the opportunity to provide further written comments about the questionnaire at the end of the study.

Participants were thanked and debriefed at the end of the questionnaire and were given details of organisations where they could seek advice if they were a target of workplace bullying.

Results

We measured the correlation between experience of workplace bullying, social identification and job satisfaction. The bivariate correlation analysis showed a negative significant correlation between bullying and social identity, $r(64) = -0.26, p = .041$. This suggests that as bullying increased social identity decreased. There was also a positive significant

relationship between social identity and job satisfaction, $r(65) = .67, p < .001$, suggesting that identifying with others also increased job satisfaction. There was a negative significant correlation between job satisfaction and bullying as expected, where increased bullying reduced job satisfaction, $r(65) = -.30, p = .016$.

Table ???. Bivariate correlation analysis showing means and (SD)

| | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Mean | 4.92 | 1.74 | 5.02 |
| (SD) | (1.24) | (0.75) | (1.23) |
| 1. Social Identity | | | |
| 2. Bullying | -.26* | | |
| 3. Job Satisfaction | .67*** | -.30* | |

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Table 5 shows the means and standard deviations of each scale measure and the bivariate correlations between them.

Multiple regression where job satisfaction was the outcome and bullying was the predictor revealed that bullying experience was significantly related to job

satisfaction; adjusted $R^2=.088$, $F(1,63) = 6.10$, $p = .016$. A further multiple regression where job satisfaction was the outcome and social identification was the predictor revealed that social identification was significantly predictive of job satisfaction, adjusted $R^2=.066$, $F(1,62) = 4.36$, $p = .041$. Additionally, social identification was significantly related to job satisfaction; adjusted $R^2=.451$, $F(1,63) = 51.72$, $p < .001$.

To test for mediation, we conducted a multiple regression analysis and entered bullying experience and social identification as predictor variables and job satisfaction as the outcome variable. The overall equation was significant; adjusted $R^2=.461$, $F(2,61) = 26.13$, $p < .001$. Social identification's relationship with job satisfaction remained significant even while controlling for bullying experience; $B = 0.64$; $t = 6.51$, $p < .001$. Most importantly, the relationship between bullying experience and job satisfaction was weaker in this analysis ($B = -0.22$; $t = 1.36$, $p = .176$) compared to the direct relationship ($B = -0.66$). These results suggest full mediation, $Z = 1.99$, $p = .046$ (see Figure 1).

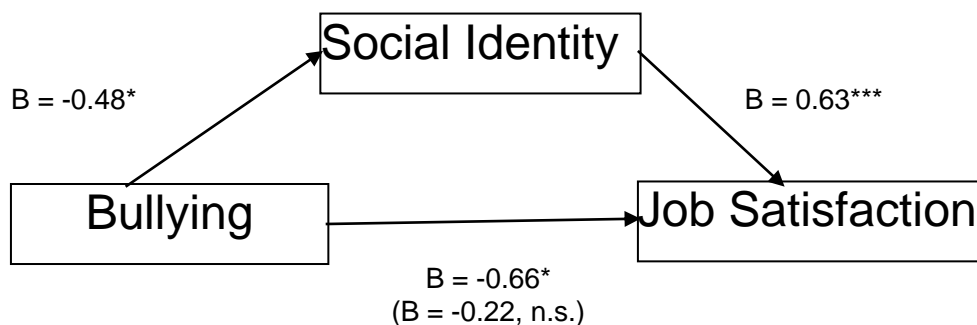


Figure 1. Mediation of the relationship between bullying and job satisfaction by social identification with work.

Discussion

The current study measured the effect of experiences of workplace bullying and social identification with colleagues on the job satisfaction of participants over 18 years-old and in current employment, using a cross-sectional questionnaire study. In line with our predictions, and prior research, it was found that low social identification with the workplace was significantly associated with increased bullying. It was also found that increased identification with others was associated with increased job satisfaction supporting past research that social identification has a positive impact on well-being,. The novel contribution is that social identification with colleagues was found to mediate the link between experiences of bullying and job satisfaction, such that bullying led to decreased social identification, that in turn led to increased job satisfaction. The implications of these results are discussed below.

The finding that low social identification followed experience of bullying, leading to greater job satisfaction underlines the importance of social processes in workplace bullying. That is, while Glambek et al. (2014) suggested that low identification might explain the link between bullying and increased job satisfaction, our results support this contention: identification with the workgroup here when experiencing bullying affected the level of job satisfaction. Other researchers have shown the moderating impact of identification on bullying (McNeill, Kerr & Mavor, 2014) Here, we demonstrate that (lowered) identification is also an important outcome of workplace bullying. This finding is in line with research showing that group identification reflects individual commitment to the group (e.g., Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 2002). Here, experience of bullying (and its negative implications for group identity) resulted in less strong identification with the ingroup. Our participants, similar to those of Matschke and Sassenberg (2010) used identification as an exit strategy in the face of negative group-relevant events.

Further work by Sassenberg and colleagues indicates that individuals who identify with a group are motivated to regulate their behaviour to be in line with group norms in order to serve the purpose of group goals (Sassenberg, Matschke & Scholl, 2011). Sassenberg et al. (2011) proposed that personal identity and social identity work together which can have an effect on well-being. They found that when group norms are not consistent with individual's self-concept (i.e. the qualities that they ascribe to their self-identity) this led to lower levels of well-being, lower positive affect, and an increased motivation to adjust their behaviour in order to decrease the discrepancy between self-identity and group norms. Most importantly, however, they found that this was applicable to those who identified highly with their group but not to those who had low identification with the group. This could help to further explain the current study as it might have been that here, participants' expectations were inconsistent with their perception of group norms which resulted in lowered identification as the workplace became a less important part of the self-concept. Thus lowered social identification alleviates the effects of workplace bullying. The role of group norms in workplace bullying and ingroup identification among low identifiers remains an important challenge for future research.

The current finding that low social identification was linked with increased experiences of bullying supports previous research that individuals who identify highly with their group would less likely be targets of bullying. For example, Alexander et al. (2012) found that despite the high levels of bullying in the kitchen environment, employees did not regard the abusive language as bullying as it was part of the socialisation process and necessary to form group cohesion in a stressful and fast paced environment. Those who were ostracised and excluded from any form of social interactions were regarded as deviant, despite working in the same group, and were not regarded as a lasting member of the team. This suggests that normative processes do play an important role in different environments.

The current study also found that social identity and job satisfaction had a significant positive association. The finding indicates that the more one identifies with others in the workgroup, the more satisfied they were in their jobs. In line with previous research, Escartin et al. (2012) found that identifying highly with the group was positively correlated with increased psychological well-being, as it was suggested that social support gained from high group identification can serve as a way to alleviate negative effects of bullying. This lends further support for social identity theory as being part of a team was suggested to be important to one's self-esteem, thereby contributing to satisfaction at work. Furthermore, in support of the current finding, Cropanzo, Howes, Grandey & Toth (1997) found that those who perceived their work environment as more positive, where colleagues helped one another, were more likely to show job satisfaction, job involvement, and organisational commitment.

Implications

This study can contribute towards research on the role of social identity as it suggests that identification with others is an outcome of experience of bullying in the workgroup, and also shows how social identity has an effect on job satisfaction. These findings may be useful towards anti-bullying interventions in the work environment by highlighting the importance of a work culture that encourages social inclusion and cooperation in order to create a cohesive group for all employees. Alternatively, employers could target decreased identification with the workplace as a possible indicator of workplace bullying.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to note that cause and effect relationships cannot be drawn from this study as cross-sectional design measuring views at just one time. Further research will need to use a longitudinal design to confirm a cause and effect relationship. It is also worth noting that the current study had a diverse participants pool including workers from organisations x and y.

Given that Alexander & McNeill showed that the moderating effects of social identification are different in different environments, future research might usefully look at identification at outcome of different environments. Whilst the NAQ-R has proven reliability, we know that bullying can take many different forms in the workplace (ref). Therefore, future research might look at the impact on social identification on different types of bullying. Additionally, the current study only measures the effect on job satisfaction and there are many other aspects of well-being such as self-esteem, depression, and life satisfaction: studies should now measure other constructs of well-being to identify whether bullying affects all aspects of well-being similarly, and whether social identification has any mediating influence on this.

.Conclusion

The current study has shown that social identification with one's workgroup is an important factor when considering the effects of workplace bullying on job satisfaction. That is, social identity fully mediates the association between bullying and job satisfaction, such that experience of workplace bullying leads to reduction in social identification, and a resultant increase in job satisfaction. However, despite the contributions to current research in the role of social identification, more research is needed for the role of processes and group norms as this can also be key to understanding the role of social identification.. The current study supports work aiming for decreased workplace bullying as a means to promote better job satisfaction. It also suggests that measuring workgroup social identity (and finding lowered identification) in organisations might be a useful marker of workplace bullying.

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